Empath

By Scotty Escobar

We're driving 40 miles per hour on the Pacific Coast Highway. I'm sitting in the passenger seat with my window rolled down. The ocean air slips into our car and overcomes the scent of 1990s leather. My hair gets tossed behind me like ribbons. I stick my hand out and feel the cool wind curve and dance between my fingers.

"You know, when I was at the airport yesterday," Elijah finally says over the ocean breeze. "I saw a mother dropping off her daughter at the TSA area."

"How did you know it was a mother and daughter?" I ask as I pull back my arm and begin rolling up my window.

"I don't, I just tell myself it was. It's recognizable to me."

I can't help but think of his mother, who died six years ago. She died of lung cancer. Smoker. Lost all her teeth right before her lungs finally gave up. "And what about them?" I respond.

"Well, the mother hugged the daughter, and it lasted a good while. I was about twenty feet away, watching. Eventually, the mother let go, and the daughter disappeared into the TSA line."

"Oh."

"Yeah. It looked like the mother was crying, too. It made me sad."

"It happens."

"You know, when I was still in college, my parents were the ones to drop me off at the airport. They'd pay for the parking and walk me over. It wasn't till I graduated that I found out that they would cry after I left. That's what they said, at least."

I pick up the aux cord and plug it into my phone. Scroll through my playlist, looking for something—"Sweater Weather" by The Neighborhood. "Was it Deborah or Cole who said this?" I say as I hit play.

"Mom."

"You trust her?"

"Not really, but what else can I do?"

"Ask Cole, I guess?"

"Doubt it. His Alzheimer's is pretty bad now."

After Deborah died, Cole started showing symptoms, so he sold his house and moved into a retirement home. His whole adult life was spent working towards a house, only to give it up in the end.

"Exit in point five miles," our GPS announces.

"Was that it to the story?" I ask.

"I guess. It just made me sad."

"Well, you're an empath. That's probably why."

"I wish I knew more."

"That's what life is, I suppose. Just lots of questions. Don't think about it too much."

"Okay."

We exit the highway, and by the time the song is over, we're pulling up to my apartment. "I'll text you once I get home," I say.

"Sure thing," he says back.

I finally step out, and he disappears between all the buildings. Everything has a pink tint now that the sun is setting. I make my way up to the third floor of my building. And as I stand in front of my door, searching for my keys, someone opens it. It's Terry, my flatmate.

"Back from the beach already?" Terry asks.

"Yeah, the bonfire was kind of boring. I don't even know why Elijah and I still hang out with my high school friends. I swear, every year, we have less and less in common."

"Oh, come on now, it couldn't have been that bad."

"They are so sheltered. Half of them don't drive."

"Oh, Alexis. You're too critical." Terry's hand is now resting on her hip.

"What can I say, I'm hard to please."

Terry pulls the door open all the way so that I can get in. I walk through and slip off my sandals. Terry shuts the door and strolls over to the kitchen. The smell of popcorn fills our apartment.

"Did you do anything fun while I was gone?" I ask Terry.

"Just watching *Gremlins*. 1980s media is so weird."

"Yeah, it's 40 years old. Half the actors are probably dead."

"Jesus, Alexis."

"Sorry. I should go shower."

I take the rest of my belongings to my room before heading to the shower. As I take off the jacket I borrowed from Elijah, I notice that the back of my neck is sensitive. "Sunburn, damn it." I pick up my phone and text Elijah—"Guess who's home with a sunburn." Elijah doesn't respond, though. He's probably still driving.

After my shower, I go back to my phone and dial my sister. The phone rings a few times, but she doesn't pick up. I finish dressing and open my window. I lean out and inhale California's air. The sky is dark now, and the sounds of sirens echo between buildings. A cop's siren. Maybe an ambulance. The signal of a crime occurring or someone in an emergency. "If it isn't you, it's someone else needing attention," I say to no one but myself.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes. It's my sister calling me back. I answer. "Hello?"

"Hi," she says back. "Sorry, I was working on my statement of purpose."

"The master's degree?"

"Yeah. I attended an info session today. Apparently, I have to name faculty members that I'd like to work with in my statement of purpose."

"How's that going?"

"The application or the faculty part?"

"Either one."

"Well. It's kind of slow. I have to research the program and the faculty members. There's this one professor who's studying autofiction and memory, though. She seems really interesting."

"Did they tell you the acceptance rate for that program?"

"They accept five percent of applicants."

"Yikes."

"I know."

"How much is the application fee?"

"$90."

"What the heck. That sounds like a scam?"

"It's only a scam once they reject you. But anyway, I don't want to keep talking about the application. Are you home yet? How's Elijah?"

"Yeah, I got home an hour ago. Elijah is alright. He was telling me a story about how he saw a mom crying at the airport."

"Oh, how come?"

"Not sure. I guess it was just on his mind. He said the mom was dropping off her daughter, and the mom started crying once the daughter left."

"Sounds tough."

I think back to when I first met Elijah in college. He had just secured residency in California and was able to qualify for in-state tuition. I remember first seeing him in a lecture hall of 200 people and asking if I could sit next to him. We were both alone. It's been a few years since then. I still wonder if we only grew close because we met so early

into our college years or if it’s because he’s just that kind-hearted. The type to care about strangers at an airport or lend you their jacket when it gets cold.

“Yeah. Speaking of, I’m actually thinking of ending things with Elijah,” I admit to my sister.

“Wait, like breaking up?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He’s a good person. That’s why.”

“That makes no sense.”

“He’s a good person. He deserves someone good.”

“And you’re not?”

“No—”

“Come on, don’t say that.”

“I don’t care half as much as he does. He deserves someone who isn’t like me.”

“You’ll hurt him if you leave.”

“And I’ll hurt him if I stay.”

Scotty Escobar

Scotty is a writer and artist based in Santa Ana, California. Having published and exhibited over the years, Scotty's work is most known for its brief yet heavy nature. Themes on grief and the body are regularly explored and examined throughout these projects.